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DC

VERTIGO

THE SANDMAN™

NO. 51

JULY 93

$1.95 US

$2.50 CAN

£1.25 UK

SUGGESTED FOR MATURE READERS

LOOKING BACK ON IT, THE THING THAT STILL SURPRISES ME IS MY OWN REACTION TO IT ALL.

CHARLENE MOONEY WAS ASLEEP IN THE SEAT BESIDE ME, AND I'D BEEN DRIVING MOST OF THE NIGHT.

I'D PROMISED CHARLENE I'D WAKE HER AT 3:00 AM AND MAKE HER DRIVE; BUT SHE WAS SLEEPING SOUNDLY AND I WASN'T *TOO* TIRED.

ANYWAY, IT WAS A WARM JUNE NIGHT. AT ONE POINT I ACTUALLY SAW AN OWL, ITS WINGS STROBING IN THE HEADLIGHTS.

I'D PASS A TRUCK MAYBE EVERY TWENTY MINUTES OR SO.

I WAS CRUISING AT EIGHTY, WHICH WOULD DROP TO SIXTY-FIVE WHEN THE RADAR DETECTOR SANG, AND I WAS HUMMING ALONG TO A BUDDY HOLLY TAPE, ONLY VERY QUIETLY, SO AS NOT TO WAKE CHARLENE, AND I'D JUST DRIVEN PAST A SMALL TOWN WITH A NAME LIKE NOWHERE, POP. 453, WHEN IT STARTED TO SNOW.

I MUST HAVE BEEN REALLY TIRED.

YOU SEE, I DIDN'T THINK THAT IT WAS WEIRD THAT IT WAS SNOWING IN JUNE. I JUST THOUGHT, *SHIT, SNOW,* AND SLOWED DOWN TO SIXTY.

AS THE SNOW GOT HEAVIER I TURNED ON MY WIPERS.

03:40

I DON'T REALLY LIKE DRIVING IN SNOW. THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT THE MOTION OF THE FALLING SNOWFLAKES THAT HURTS MY EYES, THROWS MY SENSE OF BALANCE ALL TO HELL.

IT'S LIKE TUMBLING INTO A FIELD OF STARS.

I THOUGHT ABOUT WAKING CHARLENE, JUST TO POINT OUT THE SNOW TO HER, AND ANYWAY, I WAS STARTING TO FEEL LIKE I MIGHT BE A LITTLE TOO SLEEPY TO DRIVE, WHEN SOMETHING HUGE AND STRANGE RAN OUT OF THE SIDE OF THE ROAD, IN FRONT OF THE CAR.

SHIT.

AFTER THAT EVERYTHING GOT VERY SLOW AND VERY CALM.

I WENT THROUGH THE FENCE, AND JOLTED OVER SOME MEADOW-LAND, PUMPING THE BRAKE AND WORRYING THAT I'D SCRATCH THE FENDER OF CHARLENE'S CAR AND WHAT SHE'D SAY ABOUT THAT WHEN SHE WOKE UP.

THEN I WAS BUMPING DOWN THE HILL AND THE BRAKES WEREN'T DOING ANYTHING AND THEN I WAS HEADING FOR A BIG OAK TREE: HEADING REALLY SLOWLY FOR A TREE...

AND I THOUGHT, QUITE CALMLY, I'M GOING TO DIE. I AM VERY PROBABLY GOING TO DIE...

I DECIDED THAT I SIMPLY DIDN'T HAVE TIME TO WAKE CHARLENE AND APOLOGIZE TO HER FOR KILLING US BOTH; WONDERED JUST HOW BRIGHT I'D REALLY BEEN, SAVING THE COST OF A PLANE TICKET BY CO-DRIVING CHARLENE'S CAR BACK TO CHICAGO.

IT WASN'T EVEN AS IF WE WERE FRIENDS.

BUT I WASN'T SCARED. I WASN'T WORRIED. EVERYTHING WAS HAPPENING VERY SLOWLY. IT WAS KIND OF STRAIGHTFORWARD.

I KNEW I MIGHT DIE, BUT I KNEW IT QUITE DISPASSIONATELY: MILD INTEREST WAS THE STRONGEST EMOTION I FELT.

MILD INTEREST, AND SUDDEN PUZZLEMENT AT THE REALIZATION THAT IT WAS SNOWING IN JUNE.

WE HIT THE TREE MUCH TOO HARD.

THERE WAS A SILENCE THAT WASN'T A SILENCE: THE MOTOR CUTOUT, BUT THERE WAS A WHIRRING NOISE FROM SOMEWHERE UNDER THE HOOD.

AND THE TAPE PLAYER WAS STILL GOING.

"EVERY DAY," HE SANG. "IT'S A-GETTIN' CLOSER, GOIN' FASTER THAN A ROLLER COASTER..."

SO I REALLY HADN'T DIED. I COULD HEAR CHARLENE MOANING IN THE SEAT NEXT TO ME, AND I COULDN'T MOVE.

A MOMENT OF TERROR, THEN--MY FIRST.

PERHAPS I WAS PARALYZED. PERHAPS MY SPINE HAD SNAPPED AND I'D DIE HERE, IMMOBILE, IN A FIELD IN IOWA. OR IDAHO. OR SOME OTHER STATE THAT BEGAN WITH A VOWEL.

NO. IT WAS THE SEAT BELT. I FUMBLED IT LOOSE AND CLIMBED UP OUT OF THE CAR.

CHARLENE WAS CONSCIOUS, BUT ONLY JUST. THERE WERE CUTS ON HER FACE, AND I PULLED HER OUT OF THE CAR.

EVERY THING WAS DREAMLIKE; EVERYTHING FELT UNREAL. IT WAS AS IF I WERE WATCHING MYSELF PERFORMING IN A FILM OF MY LIFE.

BRANT? WHAT... HAPPENED...?

I CRASHED YOUR CAR. THIS *THING* RAN OUT IN FRONT OF US AND--

OHH... GOD...

YOU *ASSHOLE*. YOU WRECKED MY CAR. *WHY* DIDN'T YOU WAKE ME UP? *WHY* DIDN'T YOU LET ME DRIVE?

YOU *SHOULD* HAVE WOKEN ME UP. YOU *SHOULD* HAVE...

CHARLENE? I'M TAKING YOU BACK TO THE ROAD. WE CAN FLAG DOWN A CAR, GET YOU TO A HOSPITAL...

CHARLENE? CAN YOU *HEAR* ME?

I THINK... I'M GOING *MAD*. I KEEP... THINKING... IT'S SNOWING.

IT IS, I *THINK*. NOW *HUSH*.

SO I STUMBLED THROUGH THE MEADOW BACK UP TOWARD THE ROAD, WITH BLOOD GETTING ALL OVER ME, THINKING, EITHER I CAN FLAG DOWN A CAR, OR I'LL FIND A TELEPHONE. WHATEVER HAPPENS, WE'LL BE FINE.

HOPING IT'S NOT A SKULL FRACTURE: HEAD WOUNDS BLEED A LOT ANYWAY. EVEN IF IT'S NOT BAD. I MEAN, THEY DO. EVEN I KNOW THAT.

BUT THE ROAD WAS FURTHER AWAY THAN I REMEMBERED.

I DON'T KNOW HOW FAR I WALKED, HOLDING HER. I KNOW I WALKED UNTIL I COULD WALK NO LONGER. SHE BECAME A DEAD WEIGHT, AND I SANK DOWN IN THE SNOW, UNABLE TO MOVE.

WHEN DID THE HALLUCINATIONS START? WITH THE SNOW? WITH THE ANIMALS? WITH THE VOICE?

CHARLENE WAS UNCONSCIOUS.

I WAS VERY COLD, AND NUMB. AND I WANTED NOTHING MORE THAN TO LIE DOWN AND NEVER GET UP.

THEN THE VOICE SAID:

Matey, if you asks my opinion, a-sitting there in the snow is not eggzackerly the smartest thingle as you could be a-doing of, all things considerable.

WHO--? HELLO? IS THERE SOMEBODY THERE?

Where?

HERE.

You mean APARTS from me?

Well, I'M here, leastways. That's what I says. And contrariwise, if I WEREN'T here I shouldn't of said nuffink at all.

NO, JUST YOU.

You need help, matey. You and that there young lady. That red stuff, that's BLOOD that is. Meant to be on the inside, it is. BAD sign if it's not on the inside, that's what I says.

Hm. Up the lane aways is the Inn. You just have to be SURE it's there, though. If you AREN'T sure, then fizzlywinks, it's only goin to be fireflies and treeses.

I CAN'T. I CAN'T PICK HER UP. I CAN'T MOVE. I CAN'T STAND UP.

Ah well. Allus glad to oblige, laddie.

Just down thereaways, over yonder.

I'M LOOKING AROUND, BUT THERE'S NOBODY THERE.

A SHARP PAIN, LIKE NEEDLES, IN THE REAR OF MY JEANS SENT ME SPRINGING TO MY FEET.

SOME SMALL ANIMAL SCURRIED OFF INTO THE SNOW.

PRICKLES?

I PICKED UP CHARLENE, AND STUMBLED ON.

SNOW CHANGES LANDSCAPE COMPLETELY. I COULDN'T EVEN SEEM TO FIND THE INTERSTATE.

BUT I FOUND SOME KIND OF COUNTRY ROAD.

AND AT THE END OF THE ROAD I SAW THE LIGHT.

FIREFLIES...?

Worlds' end

a free house

WHO WILL THEN BE NEXT?

AH, THERE'S A TALE I HEARD ONCE IN ABDERA, ABOUT A HUNGRY MIRROR, MADE OF BEATEN BRONZE...

THAT OLD CHESTNUT? YOU CAN DO BETTER THAN THAT, MENTON.

WELL, THEN...

BLIND ME! WHAT HAVE WE *HERE*? WHAT HAPPENED TO *YOU*, FRIEND? TO YOUR WOMAN ALSO?

I NEED TO USE YOUR PHONE. THE CAR IT WAS -- SOME ANIMAL IN THE ROAD -- THE TREE -- MY FRIEND IS BADLY HURT...

A *TELEPHONE*? I HAVE HEARD OF SUCH THINGS. I DO NOT BELIEVE SUCH AN OBJECT IS TO BE FOUND IN THIS INN, NOR THAT IT COULD SUMMON ANY ASSISTANCE FOR YOUR FRIEND IF IT WAS.

I *AM*, HOWEVER, A CHIRURGEON OF NO MEAN SKILL.

LANDLADY! THERE ARE TRAVELLERS HERE WHO NEED HELP!

CAUGHT BY THE *STORM*, EH?

HERE, DRINK THIS.

BUT I'VE GOT TO--

DRINK.

WHAT *WAS* THAT? IT TASTED LIKE CLOVES AND HONEY AND...

SOMETHING THAT WILL HELP YOU.

WHERE... WHERE *IS* THIS PLACE?

THIS IS THE INN OF THE WORLDS' END. MY TURN. WHAT'S YOUR TALE?

I'M--MY NAME IS BRANT TUCKER. THAT'S CHARLENE MOONEY. SHE'S IN SALES, AND SHE WANTED A CO-DRIVER FOR THE RIDE UP TO CHICAGO AND I--I'M SORRY.

THE CAR'S BACK IN A FIELD SOMEWHERE.

I NEED TO GET HER TO A DOCTOR.

AHH... DOES ANYONE HERE HAVE A PICKUP TRUCK? AND I SHOULD RING AHEAD, LET THEM KNOW WE'RE GOING TO BE A BIT LATE.

SOME KIND OF ANIMAL RAN OUT IN FRONT OF US.

IT *WASN'T* MY FAULT.

EASY. *EASY* THERE, FELLOW.

I'M AFRAID WE'RE ALL IN THE SAME BOAT AS YOU, OR *MOST* OF US--STRANDED HERE BY THE STORM.

THE SNOWSTORM? YES. *BUT...*

IT'S *NOT* A SNOWSTORM, FRIEND. IT'S A REALITY STORM.

NOW, CHIRON IS GOING TO TAKE YOUR LADY FRIEND INTO THE BACK, AND DO WHAT HE *CAN* FOR HER.

BUT I SHOULD--

YOU SHOULD *WHAT*? ARE *YOU* A DOCTOR?

NO.

HE IS. THE FINEST PHYSICIAN IN A DOZEN REALMS.

THEN WE'RE REALLY GOING TO BE ALL RIGHT?

INDEED YOU WILL.

OH... GOOD...

AND THEN IT WAS DARK, AND WARM, AND--

--COMFORTABLE--

HEY. MISTER TUCKER. I GOT YOU SOME STEW.

WAKEY WAKEY.

STEW?

WHERE AM I?

YOU'RE IN THE INN, SIR. YOU'VE BEEN ASLEEP FOR ABOUT 15 HOURS, GIVE OR TAKE.

YOU'RE LIKE THE REST OF 'EM: WAITING FOR THE STORM TO END, BEFORE THEY CAN GO ON THEIR WAY.

CHARLENE?

THE *LADY* YOU WERE WITH? SHE'S NONE THE WORSE FOR WEAR. THE HORSE-MAN FIXED HER UP.

SHE'S IN THE *CORNER* OVER THERE. *SEE?*

WHAT ARE THEY DOING?

KILLING TIME.

HUH?

CHARLENE?

BRANT. YOU'RE AWAKE. *GOOD.* EAT YOUR STEW.

WHAT'S GOING ON?

WE'RE TELLING *STORIES.* YOU JUST MISSED A REALLY GOOD ONE ABOUT A MAN WHO WON NOVEMBER 1937 IN A POKER GAME.

LOOK, YOUR CAR. EVERYTHING THAT HAPPENED...

IT CAN *WAIT,* BRANT. WE AREN'T GOING ANYWHERE, NOT FOR A WHILE AT LEAST.

ANYWAY, MISTER GAHERIS WAS ABOUT TO BEGIN.

I CALL THIS TALE, IN DEFERENCE TO ANOTHER, RATHER LONGER STORY, A *TALE OF TWO CITIES.*

ALTHOUGH HOW MANY CITIES THERE ARE IN IT TRULY, I MUST CONFESS I DO NOT KNOW...

THERE WAS ONCE A MAN WHO LIVED IN A CITY, AND HE HAD LIVED IN THAT CITY ALL HIS LIFE.

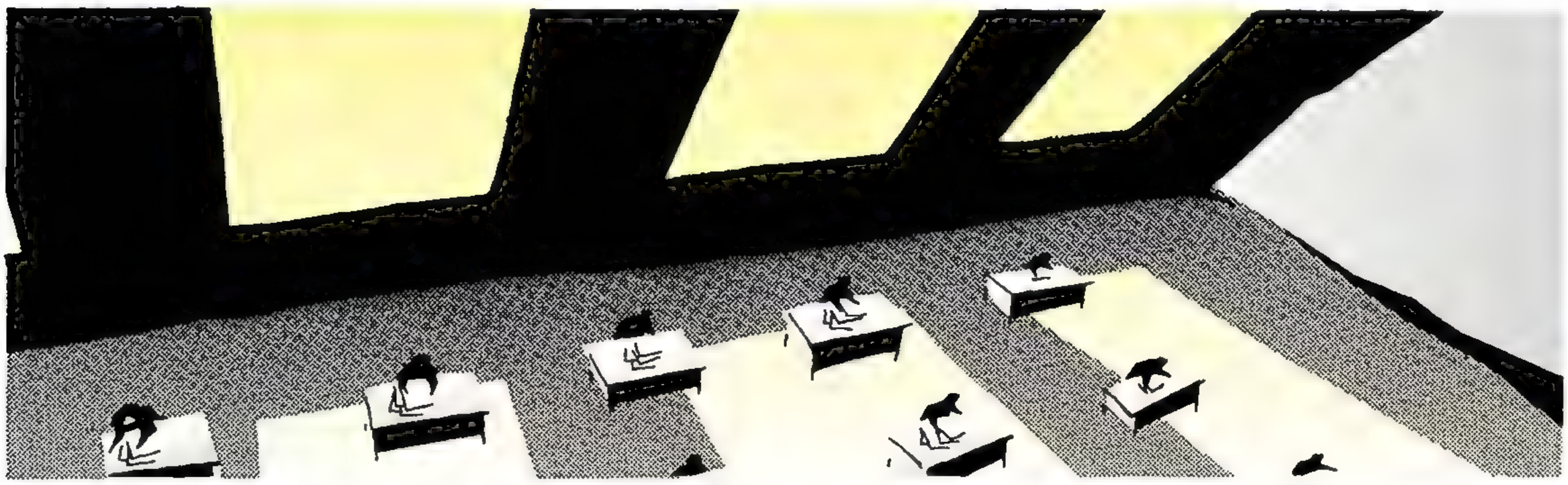
IT WAS NOT THAT HE HAD NEVER LEFT THAT CITY; HE HAD HOLIDAYED BY THE SEA, AND, ON THE OCCASION OF HIS PARENTS' DEATH, HE TOOK HIS SMALL INHERITANCE AND SPENT TWO WEEKS ON A TROPICAL ISLAND, ON WHICH HE CONTRACTED A NASTY CASE OF SUNBURN.

HE HAD A JOB IN THE CITY CENTER, AND HE COMMUTED TO WORK EACH MORNING FROM THE CITY SUBURBS, RETURNED HOME AGAIN IN THE EVENING.

IN THE SUBWAY TRAIN, IN THE MORNING, HE WOULD READ A NEWSPAPER, AND WONDER WHAT WOULD HAPPEN WERE THE SUBWAY CARRIAGE SUDDENLY TO BE TRANSPORTED TO A DISTANT PLANET: HOW LONG IT WOULD TAKE BEFORE THE PASSENGERS BEGAN TO SPEAK, ONE TO ANOTHER; WHO WOULD MAKE LOVE TO WHOM; WHO WOULD BE EATEN SHOULD THEY RUN OUT OF FOOD.

HE FELT VAGUELY ASHAMED OF THESE DAYDREAMS.

HE WORKED ALL DAY AT A DESK, IN A ROOM WITH DOZENS OF MEN AND WOMEN WHO SAT AT DESKS LIKE HIS AND DID JOBS MUCH LIKE HIS. HE NEITHER LIKED NOR DISLIKED HIS JOB: HE HAD TAKEN THE JOB BECAUSE IT WAS A JOB FOR LIFE, BECAUSE IT PROVIDED HIM WITH STABILITY AND SECURITY.



BUT ON HIS LUNCH BREAK, WHILE HIS FELLOW WORKERS WENT OFF TO A CAFETERIA ON ANOTHER FLOOR, TO EAT SUBSIDIZED LUNCHES AND EXCHANGE GOSSIP, THE MAN, WHOSE NAME WAS ROBERT, WOULD TAKE A SANDWICH FROM HIS BRIEFCASE, AND, FOR AN HOUR, EXPLORE THE BYWAYS OF THE CITY.

HE WOULD WALK, OR RIDE A BUS, AND HE WOULD STARE AT HIS CITY, AND THIS MADE HIM HAPPY.

A CARVING ON A WALL ABOVE A DOOR ON A CONDEMNED HOUSE; A BRIGHT FLASH OF SUNLIGHT REFLECTING OFF THE RAILINGS OF A PARK, MAKING THEM SERRIED SPEARS TO GUARD THE GREEN GRASS AND RUNNING CHILDREN; A GRAVESTONE IN A CHURCHYARD, ERODED BY WIND AND RAIN AND TIME UNTIL THE WORDS ON THE STONE HAD BEEN LOST BUT THE MOSSES AND LICHENS STILL SPELLED OUT LETTERS FROM FORGOTTEN ALPHABETS...

ALL THESE SIGHTS, AND MANY OTHERS, HE TREASURED AND COLLECTED.

ROBERT SAW THE CITY AS A HUGE JEWEL, AND THE TINY MOMENTS OF REALITY HE FOUND IN HIS LUNCH-HOURS AS FACETS, CUT AND GLITTERING, OF THE WHOLE.

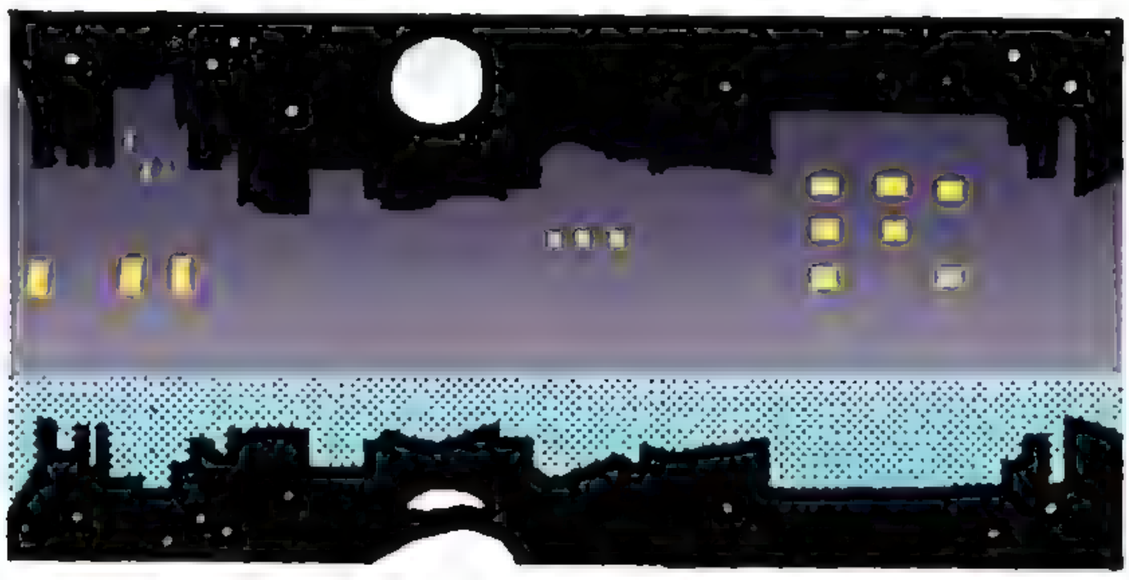
IS THERE ANY PERSON IN THE WORLD WHO DOES NOT DREAM? WHO DOES NOT CONTAIN WITHIN THEM WORLDS UNIMAGINED?

IT DID NOT OCCUR TO ROBERT THAT EACH OF HIS WORKMATES HAD SOMETHING THAT MADE THEM, ALSO, UNIQUE; NOR DID IT OCCUR TO HIM THAT HIS PASSION FOR THE CITY WAS IN ITSELF OUT OF THE ORDINARY.

SOMETIMES ROBERT WOULD WALK ALONE IN THE CITY AT NIGHT, WHEN HE COULD NOT SLEEP, TO SEE THE FACE THE CITY PRESENTED AFTER DARK, WHICH WAS NOT ITS DAYTIME FACE. ONCE HE SHIVERED TO HEAR, THROUGH A WINDOW, SOMEONE SCREAMING--LOST IN A NIGHTMARE, PERHAPS, OR WAKING FROM HORRORS THEY WERE UNABLE TO FACE.

THERE WAS A RIVER THAT RAN THROUGH THE CITY, AND DURING HIS NIGHT WALKS ROBERT WOULD STARE INTO THE RIVER, AND WATCH THE LIGHTS OF THE CITY REFLECTED IN THE WATER.

THE NEXT DAY AT WORK HE WOULD BE TIRED.



ONE MORNING HE TOOK THE SUBWAY TO WORK AS HE USUALLY DID, SPENT HIS DAY TOILING IN THE ROOM OF DESKS. ON HIS LUNCH HOUR HE WALKED THROUGH THE SHOPPING DISTRICT.

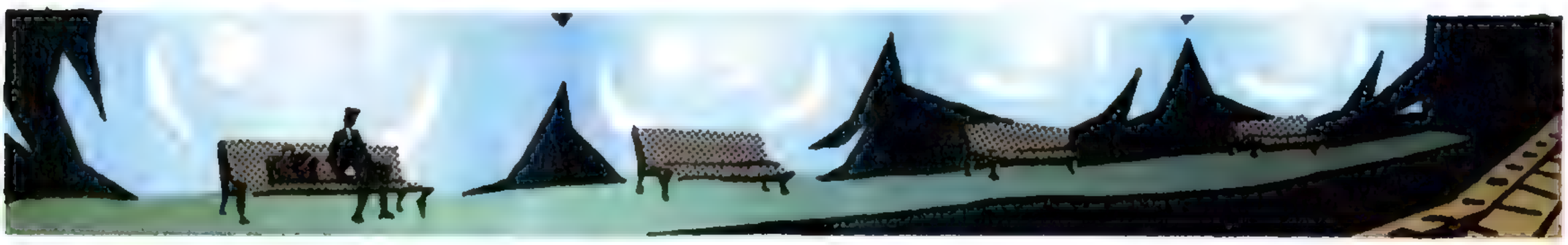
HE PASSED STREETS AND LANES AND ALLEYS HE HAD PASSED A HUNDRED TIMES BEFORE; AND THEN HE SAW THE SILVER ROAD.

IT GLITTERED AND GLIMMERED AWAY BEYOND A STREET MARKET.

ROBERT RAN THROUGH THE MARKET, BUT WHEN HE REACHED THE END OF THE STREET HE FOUND ONLY AN ALLEYWAY, AND THE SILVER ROAD WAS NOWHERE TO BE SEEN.

HE RETURNED TO WORK, BUT FOUND HIMSELF UNABLE TO CONCENTRATE. TWO HOURS' WORK STRETCHED INTO THREE AND FOUR, AND BY THE TIME HE HAD FINISHED HE WAS ALONE IN AN EMPTY OFFICE.

THE SUN HAD SET, AND HE HAD MISSED HIS USUAL TRAIN HOME.



ROBERT WAITED ON AN EMPTY PLATFORM; AND DAYDREAMED ABOUT THE SILVER ROAD THROUGH THE CITY.

PERHAPS HE DOZED, PERHAPS NOT; ANYWAY, HE WAS JERKED OUT OF HIS REVERIE BY THE ARRIVAL OF THE TRAIN.

IT WAS UNLIKE ANY UNDERGROUND TRAIN HE HAD SEEN BEFORE; THE LINES OF IT WERE SLEEK AND STRANGE.

IT ARRIVED SILENTLY,
AND ROBERT GOT ON.

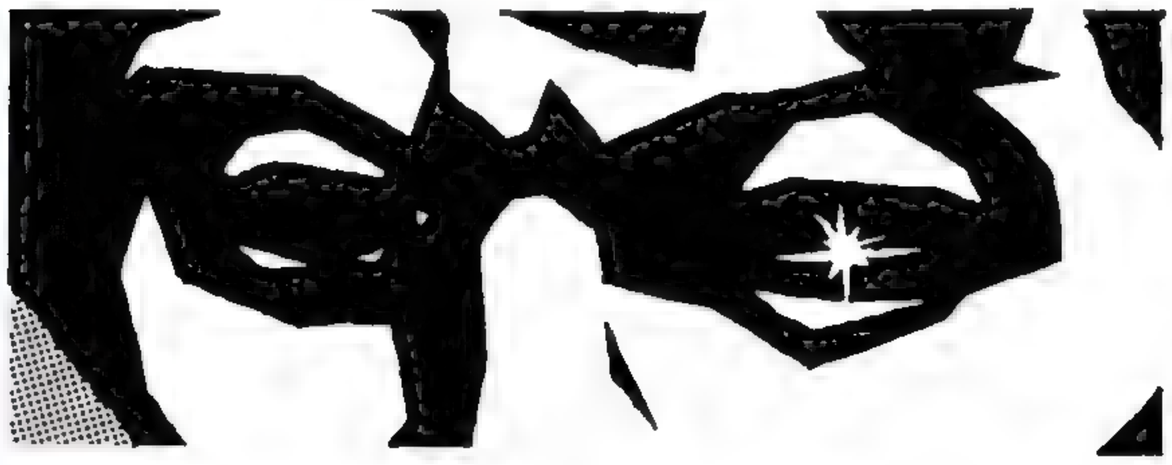
THERE WAS ONLY ONE OTHER PASSENGER ON THE TRAIN.

HE WAS STANDING, SOLITARY, IN THE COMPARTMENT ROBERT HAD ENTERED: A PALE MAN, WITH WILD, BLACK HAIR, DRESSED IN A LONG BLACK COAT.

IT TOOK ONLY A FEW MINUTES FOR ROBERT TO REALIZE SOMETHING WAS WRONG: THE TRAIN WAS NOT STOPPING AT ANY STATIONS. IT WAS INSTEAD SPEEDING ONWARD SILENTLY BENEATH THE CITY.

"EXCUSE ME? IS *THIS* TRAIN GOING TO *STOP*? IS THIS THE CITY LINE? I'M AFRAID I GOT ON THE WRONG *TRAIN*. I'M AFRAID..."

THE STRANGER SIMPLY STARED AT HIM. DARK EYES, LIKE POOLS OF NIGHT.



ROBERT TOOK A STEP BACKWARD THEN, NERVOUSLY, AND, AS HE DID, HE FELT THE TRAIN BEGIN TO SLOW.

THE LIGHTS OF A STATION GLIMMERED THROUGH THE WINDOWS OF THE TRAIN.

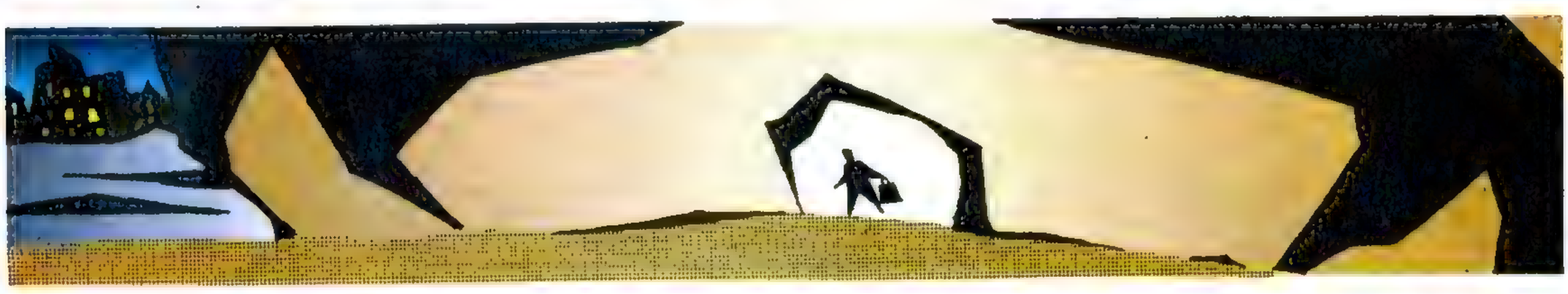
THE DOORS HISSED OPEN, AND ROBERT STUMBLED OUT.

HE DID NOT RECOGNIZE THE STATION. THERE WAS NO SIGN INDICATING ITS NAME, AND IT WAS POORLY LIT.

HE HURRIED UP THE STAIRS. ROBERT WAS CERTAIN ENOUGH OF HIS FAMILIARITY WITH THE CITY TO KNOW THAT ONCE ON THE STREETS IT WOULD BE A SIMPLE THING FOR HIM TO ORIENT HIMSELF.

HE WOULD GET A TAXI HOME. CERTAINLY IT WOULD BE EXPENSIVE, BUT IT WAS AN EXPENSE HE WOULD WILLINGLY BEAR. HE STEPPED THROUGH AN ARCHWAY ONTO THE STREET.

THERE WAS SOMETHING MORE THAN FAMILIAR ABOUT THE STREET HE STOOD IN. SOMETHING HE FOUND IMPOSSIBLE TO PLACE; AND HE FOUND HIMSELF UNABLE TO NAME THE STREET.



HE TURNED, BUT THE ARCHWAY WAS GONE.

BUILDINGS LOOMED ABOVE HIM, HIGH AND LIGHTLESS.

ROBERT HURRIED THROUGH THE CITY -- IF HE WAS STILL IN THE CITY, FOR HE WAS IN TWO MINDS ABOUT THIS.

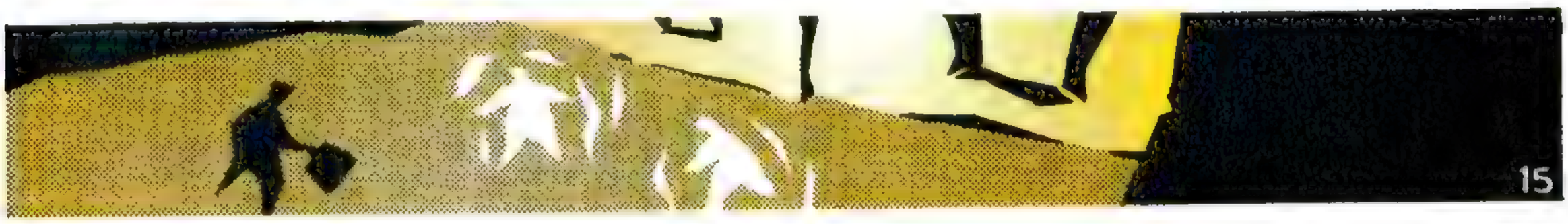
A COLD WIND BLEW DOWN THE THOROUGHFARES AND AVENUES, BRINGING WITH IT FAMILIAR SCENTS: THE MEAT MARKET AT DAWN; HOT TELEVISION SETS FROM THE ELECTRICAL DISTRICT; THE SMELL OF EARTH FRESH-DUG, AND OF BURNING TAR, OF SEWERS AND SUBWAYS.

ROBERT BEGAN TO RUN, CERTAIN THAT, EVENTUALLY, HE WOULD SEE A STREET OR BUILDING HE RECOGNIZED.

HE DIDN'T. EVENTUALLY HE COLLAPSED, BREATHLESS, AGAINST A CONCRETE WALL.

FROM TIME TO TIME, ROBERT COULD FEEL EYES ON HIM FROM THE WINDOWS AND DOORWAYS. BUT THE FACES HE SAW, WHEN HE SAW FACES, WERE LOST AND SCARED AND DISTANT, AND NO ONE EVER CAME CLOSE ENOUGH TO HIM TO TALK.

THERE WERE ALSO CERTAIN OTHER PEOPLE IN THE CITY, BUT THEY WERE BRIEF, FLEETING PEOPLE WHO SHIMMERED AND VANISHED.



FROM TIME TO TIME THE SKY WOULD LIGHTEN; AT OTHER TIMES IT WENT DARK. BUT THERE WERE NO STARS OR MOON IN THE SKY IN THE DARKNESS, NO SUN BY DAY.

THE ROADS MIXED HIM UP, TURNED HIM AROUND. HERE, HE WOULD PASS A CATHEDRAL OR MUSEUM, THERE, A SKYSCRAPER OR A FOUNTAIN --ALWAYS HAUNTINGLY FAMILIAR. BUT HE NEVER PASSED THE SAME LANDMARK TWICE, COULD NEVER FIND THE ROAD TO RETURN HIM TO THE LANDMARK AGAIN.

NOR WAS HE EVER ABLE TO FIND THE SUBWAY STATION FROM WHICH HE HAD ENTERED THIS DISTORTED ECHO OF HIS CITY.

HE HAD BEEN IN THE CITY FOR DAYS, OR FOR WEEKS, OR PERHAPS EVEN MONTHS. HE HAD NO WAY OF KNOWING.

IT WAS SUNRISE, ALTHOUGH NO SUN ROSE, WHEN ROBERT FOUND THE RIVER. IT SHIMMERED AND SHIVERED LIKE A SILVER RIBBON. THERE WAS A BRIDGE ABOVE THE RIVER, AN ELEGANT CURVING ARCH MADE OF STONE AND METAL.

HE WALKED UP TO THE TOP OF THE BRIDGE, AND STARED AT THE CITY.

HE HAD TAKEN IT FOR A PILE OF RAGS; BUT IT STIRRED AND MOVED AND STOOD UPRIGHT.

THE OLD MAN WALKED OVER TO ROBERT. "IT'S ***BEAUTIFUL***, ISN'T IT?"

"YES," SAID ROBERT. "IT IS."

THEY STOOD THERE, ON THE BRIDGE TOGETHER, LOOKING OUT.

"WHERE ***ARE*** WE?" ASKED ROBERT.

"IN THE CITY," SAID THE OLD MAN.

ROBERT SHOOK HIS HEAD. "I HAVE WALKED THE CITY ALL OF MY LIFE. THIS IS ***NOT*** THE CITY, ALTHOUGH THERE ARE MOMENTS WHEN I SEEM TO RECOGNIZE FRAGMENTS OF THE CITY, IN THE MANNER OF ONE RECOGNIZING A LINE FROM A FAMILIAR POEM IN A STRANGE BOOK."

THE OLD MAN TOOK ROBERT BY THE SHOULDER.

"THIS ***IS*** THE CITY," HE REPEATED.

"THEN... WHERE IN THE CITY ARE WE?"

"I THINK..." THE OLD MAN PAUSED. THERE WAS A COLD WIND, UP THERE ON THE BRIDGE.

"I HAVE BEEN HERE FOR MANY, MANY YEARS. HOW MANY, I DO NOT KNOW. AND IN THAT TIME I HAVE HAD MUCH TIME FOR THINKING."

"PERHAPS A CITY IS A LIVING THING. EACH CITY HAS ITS OWN PERSONALITY, AFTER ALL.

"LOS ANGELES IS NOT VIENNA. LONDON IS NOT MOSCOW. CHICAGO IS NOT PARIS. EACH CITY IS A COLLECTION OF LIVES AND BUILDINGS AND IT HAS ITS OWN PERSONALITY."

"SO?"

"SO, IF A CITY HAS A PERSONALITY, MAYBE IT ALSO HAS A SOUL. MAYBE IT DREAMS.

"*THAT* IS WHERE I BELIEVE WE HAVE COME. WE ARE IN THE DREAMS OF THE CITY. THAT'S WHY CERTAIN PLACES HOVER ON THE BRINK OF RECOGNITION; WHY WE ALMOST KNOW WHERE WE ARE."

"YOU MEAN THAT WE'RE ASLEEP?"

"NO. WE ARE AWAKE, OR SO I BELIEVE. I MEAN THAT THE CITY IS ASLEEP. AND THAT WE ARE ALL STUMBLING THROUGH THE CITY'S DREAM."

TOGETHER THE TWO MEN CROSSED THE BRIDGE, AND REENTERED THE CITY.

"THE *FLICKER* PEOPLE--WHO ARE THEY?"

"WHO KNOWS? PERHAPS THEY ARE WAKING PEOPLE, FLICKERING THROUGH OUR WORLD. FOR ONE FRACTIONAL MOMENT THEY ENTER THE CITY'S DREAM, AND SEE THE CITY THE WAY WE SEE IT. OR PERHAPS THEY ARE PEOPLE THE CITY IS DREAMING OF--"

ABOVE THEM VAST, CYCLOPEAN WALLS LOOMED AND TOWERED. LIGHTS FLICKERED ON AND OFF IN DISTANT BUILDINGS, AS IF THEY WERE SPELLING OUT MESSAGES IN SOME UNCERTAIN CODE FOR A FAR-OFF OBSERVER.

"WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO ME?" ASKED ROBERT.

THE OLD MAN SHRUGGED. "I HAVE MET MANY PEOPLE IN MY TIME IN THE CITY," HE SAID. "BUT IT IS A BIG CITY, AND THERE ARE FEW OF US. I DO NOT KNOW WHAT WILL BECOME OF YOU. FOR MYSELF, I AM CONTENT TO WANDER THE STREETS.

"PERHAPS ONE DAY I SHALL RETURN TO THE WAKING WORLD. I AM SEARCHING FOR A ROAD I KNEW IN THE REAL CITY--AND WHEN I FIND IT, I SHALL WALK DOWN IT AND FIND MYSELF IN THE REAL WORLD ONCE MORE.

"THIS IS WHAT I HOPE AND PRAY FOR; IT IS, AFTER ALL, PREFERABLE TO THE ALTERNATIVE.

"AND THAT *IS*?"

"THAT THE CITY SHOULD WAKE," SAID THE OLD MAN. "THAT IT SHOULD WAKE AND--"

BUT HE BROKE OFF THERE, AND POINTED WILDLY. "*LOOK!*" HE EXCLAIMED. "DO YOU NOT *SEE* IT? THAT CORNER, THERE, BETWEEN THE WALL AND THE OLD HOUSE? IS IT NOT *FAMILIAR?*"

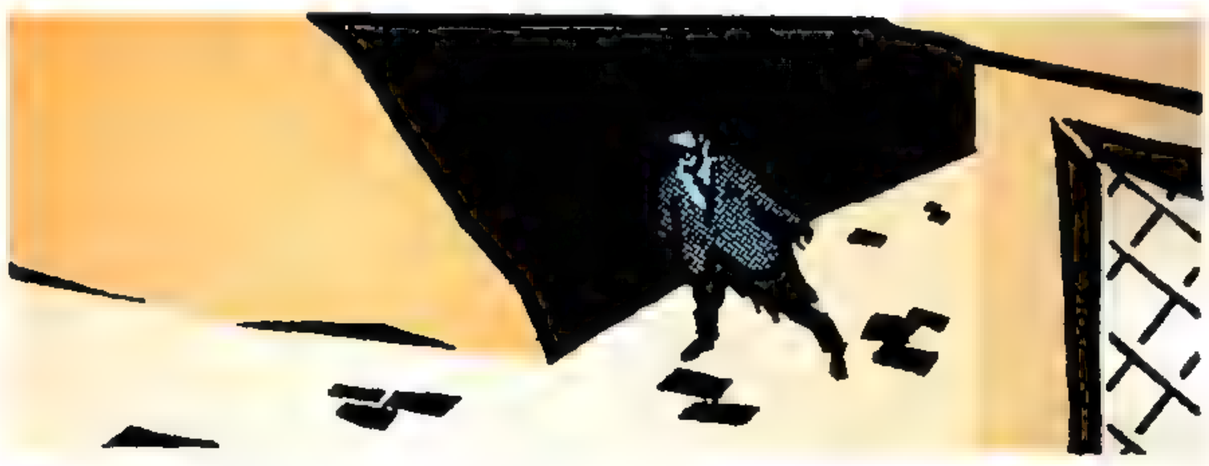
ROBERT STARED, PUZZLED.

BUT ALREADY THE OLD MAN WAS RUNNING ACROSS THE STREET.

"*WAIT! WAIT* FOR *ME!*" THE OLD MAN WAS SHOUTING.

THE OLD MAN DARTED ACROSS THE STREET AND INTO AN ALLEYWAY AND WAS GONE.

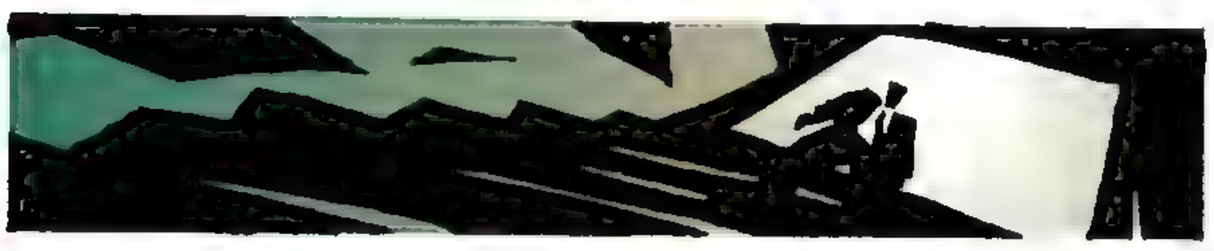
WHEN ROBERT REACHED THE ENTRANCE TO THE ALLEYWAY HE FOUND IT TO BE A DEAD END, AND QUITE EMPTY. HE NEVER SAW THE OLD MAN AGAIN.



BUT NOW ROBERT HAD A PURPOSE. HE LOOKED FOR SOMETHING HE KNEW: A PATH, OR STREET OR ALLEY; HE WALKED THE CITY OF DREAMS HUNTING FOR SOMETHING HE RECOGNIZED: SEARCHING FOR THE REAL.

HE WOULD CLIMB THE STAIRS OF SKYSCRAPERS HUNTING FOR A DOORWAY HE HAD SEEN BEFORE.

HE WOULD DESCEND BELOW THE CITY, FOLLOWING IMAGINARY TRAILS DOWN WET DANK STEPS THAT LED HIM NOWHERE.



HE WALKED TINY BACKSTREETS, PASSING RESTAURANTS FOREVER CLOSED, OR SMALL STORES THAT, FROM ALL HE COULD SEE THROUGH THEIR WINDOWS, SOLD MARVELS, BUT WHICH WERE NEVER OPEN FOR BUSINESS.

HE WALKED PERHAPS FOR MONTHS, SPEAKING TO NO ONE, UNTIL THE DAY HE ENCOUNTERED A WOMAN IN THE ROOF GARDEN OF A BUILDING THAT JUTTED UP FROM THE CITY LIKE A BLACK TOOTH.

SHE WAS SITTING BY A SMALL FOUNTAIN, AND LOOKED UP AT HIM AS HE APPROACHED.

"SIR-- IF YOU ARE REAL, AND NOT A THING OF FIGMENT AND FANTASY-- WHERE *ARE* WE?" SHE ASKED HIM.

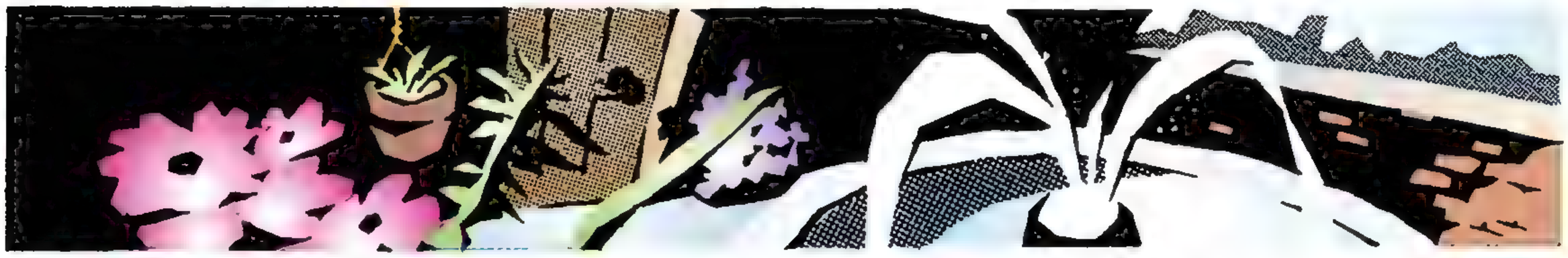
"HOW REAL I AM I CAN NO LONGER SAY," HE TOLD HER. "BUT WE *ARE* IN THE CITY, OR SO I HAVE BEEN ASSURED."

THERE WAS SOMETHING ABOUT THE WOMAN; THE WAY SHE HELD HER HEAD, PERHAPS, OR A CERTAIN COLOR TO HER EYES, OR THE LINE A CURL TRACED AS IT TUMBLED FROM HER FOREHEAD ONTO HER CHEEK.

ROBERT STEPPED CLOSER TO HER.

IT WAS THEN, BEHIND THE FLOWERS AND POTTED PLANTS (SOME PROSAIC, SOME POSSESSING A STRANGE AND EXOTIC QUALITY THAT WAS ALMOST ALIEN), HE NOTICED A DOORWAY.

IT WAS A DOOR OF ALMOST UNBEARABLE FAMILIARITY; HE HAD PASSED IT EACH DAY, ON HIS WAY TO WORK, IN A LIFE THAT NOW SEEMED DISTANT AND IMAGINARY AS THE MOON.

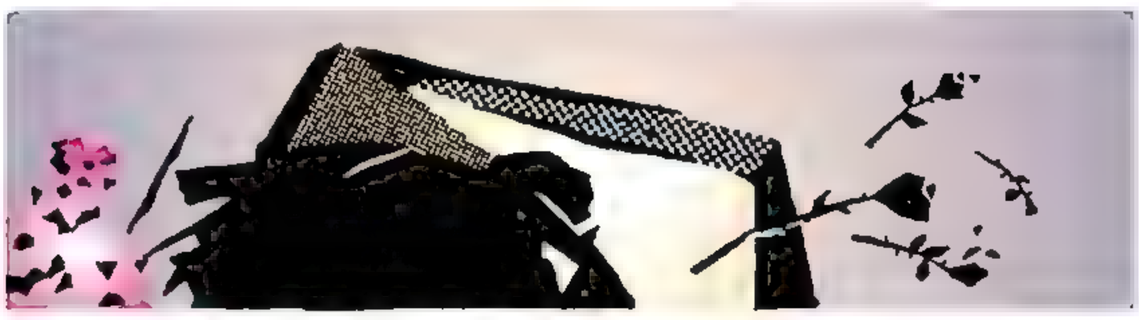


"WHAT IS YOUR NAME?" SHE ASKED HIM.

THE WOMAN REACHED OUT A HAND. ROBERT THOUGHT THAT SHE WAS GOING TO TOUCH HIM; AND HAD SHE TOUCHED HIM HE WOULD HAVE BEEN LOST FOREVER.

HE RAN HEADLONG ACROSS THE ROOF-GARDEN, KNOCKING PLANTS OVER AS HE WENT, RUNNING HEADLONG, PELL-MELL, HELTER-SKELTER, WITHOUT LOOKING BACK.

THROUGH THE DOORWAY, THEN.



AND HE WAS BLINDED.

"ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?"

ROBERT LOOKED AROUND HIM, BLINKING IN THE SUNLIGHT.

"THANK YOU," HE SAID. "I AM FINE."

I MET ROBERT IN A SMALL VILLAGE OFF THE COAST OF SCOTLAND, SOME YEARS AFTER THE EVENTS I HAVE MENTIONED HERE.

IT WAS A VERY SMALL VILLAGE HE LIVED IN, CONSISTING OF A FEW SCATTERED HOUSES AND FARMS, AND A SHOP THAT SERVED AS POST OFFICE, VILLAGE STORE, AND INN. OTHER THAN THAT THERE WERE ONLY STUNTED SHEEP AND BLASTED TREES, AND THE CONSTANT LOW SUSURRUS OF THE SEA.

IT WAS IN THAT INN THAT HE TOLD ME THE TALE I HAVE TOLD YOU.

HE WAS A MOST FRIGHTENED MAN.

"DO YOU FEAR THAT ONE DAY YOU WILL RETURN TO THE DREAMS OF THE CITY?" I ASKED HIM. "IS *THAT* WHY YOU LIVE OUT HERE?"

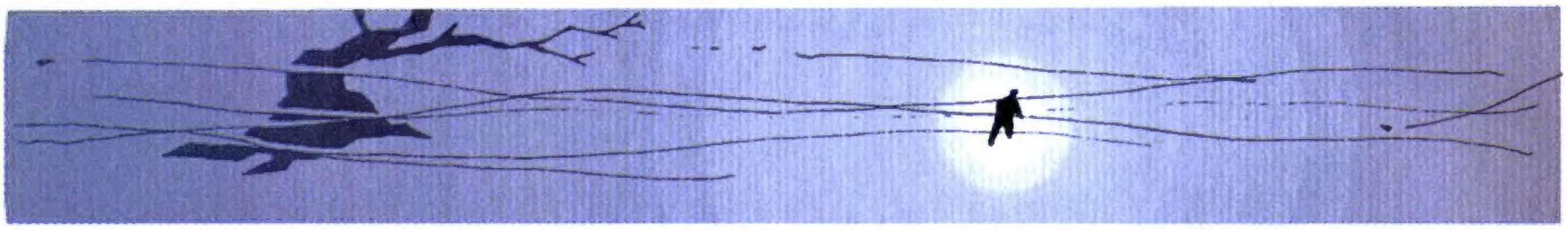
HE SHOOK HIS HEAD, AND WE WALKED OUTSIDE. THE MIST HUNG LOW AND WHITE AND THICK AND WE MIGHT AS WELL HAVE BEEN NOWHERE AT ALL.

"IF THE CITY WAS DREAMING," HE TOLD ME, "THEN THE CITY IS ASLEEP. AND I DO NOT FEAR CITIES SLEEPING, STRETCHED OUT UNCONSCIOUS AROUND THEIR RIVERS AND ESTUARIES, LIKE CATS IN THE MOONLIGHT. SLEEPING CITIES ARE TAME AND HARMLESS THINGS."

"WHAT I FEAR," HE SAID, "IS THAT ONE DAY THE CITIES WILL WAKEN. THAT ONE DAY THE CITIES WILL RISE."

I LIKE TO BELIEVE IT WAS ONLY THE COLD THAT MADE ME SHIVER, ONLY A STRAND OF FOG IN MY THROAT THAT CAUSED ME TO CATCH MY BREATH.

ROBERT WALKED AWAY ACROSS THE MOOR AND I NEVER SAW HIM AGAIN.



SINCE THAT TIME I HAVE WALKED WITH LESS COMFORT IN CITIES.

Neil Gaiman, writer Bryan Talbot, penciller, pgs. 1-9, pg. 24
Mark Buckingham, inker, pgs. 1-9, pg. 24 Alec Stevens, interior illustrator, pgs. 10-24
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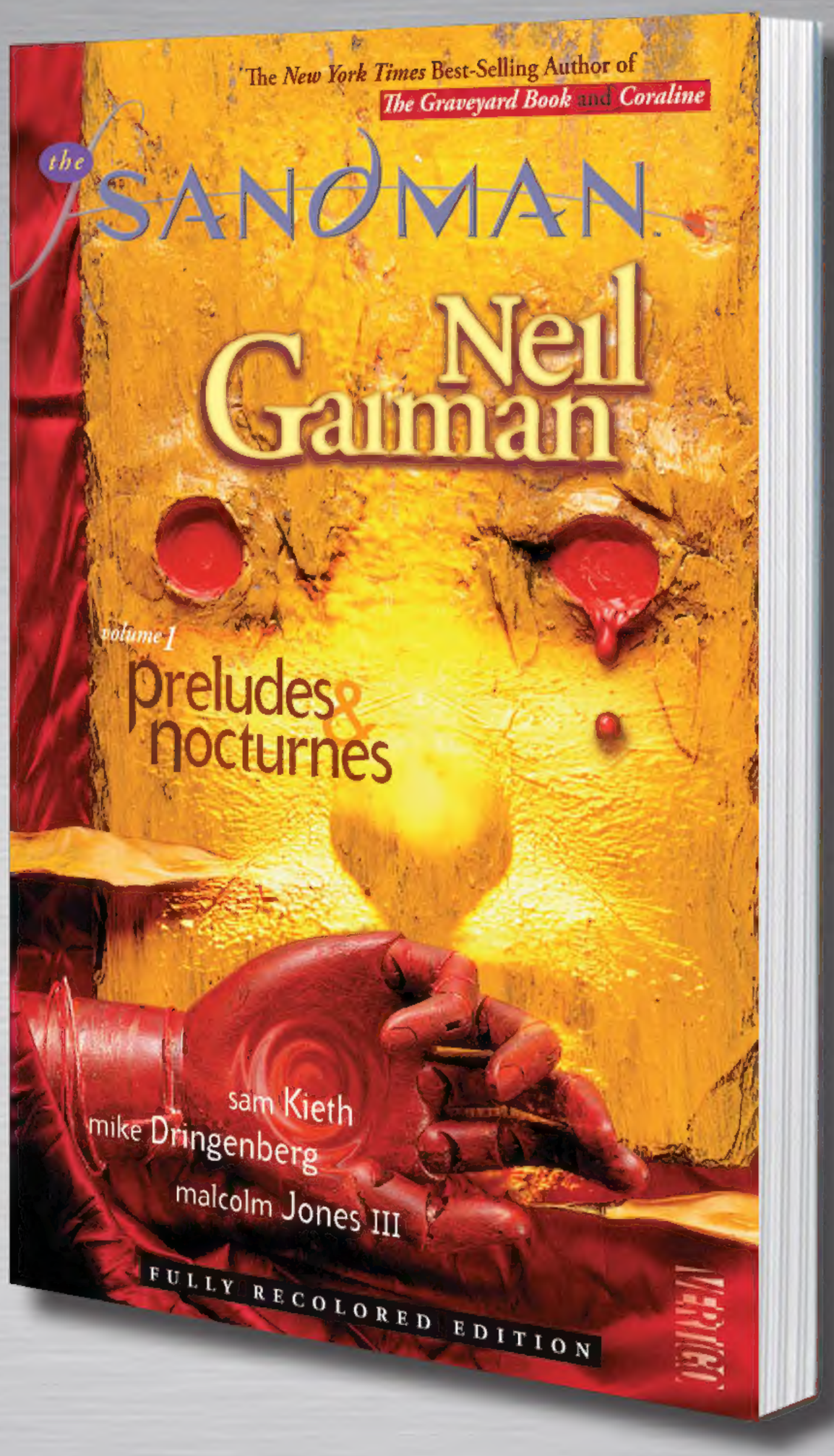
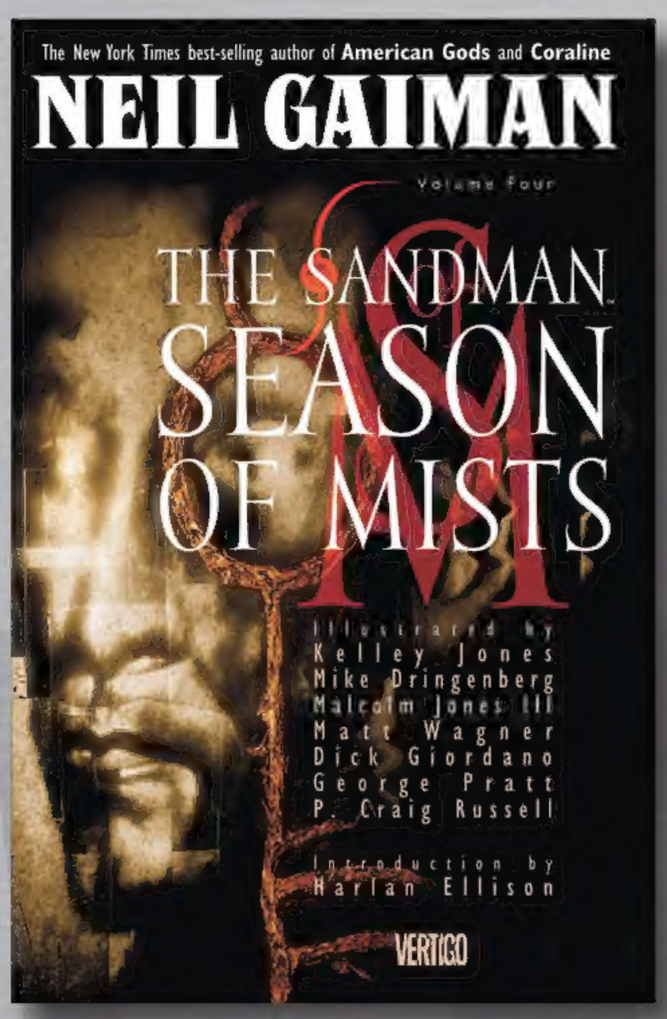
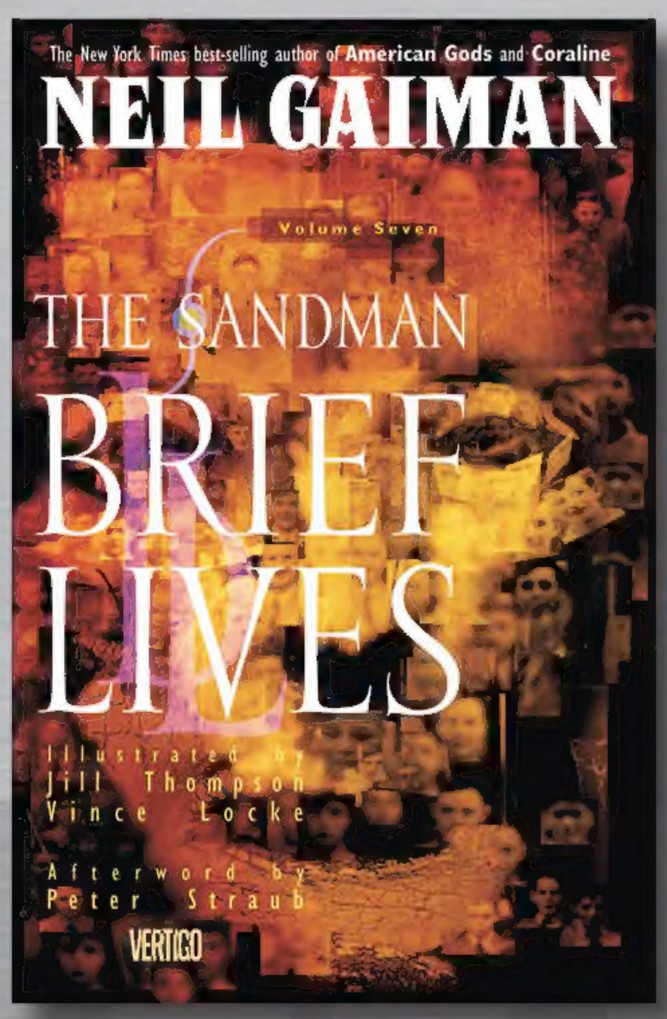


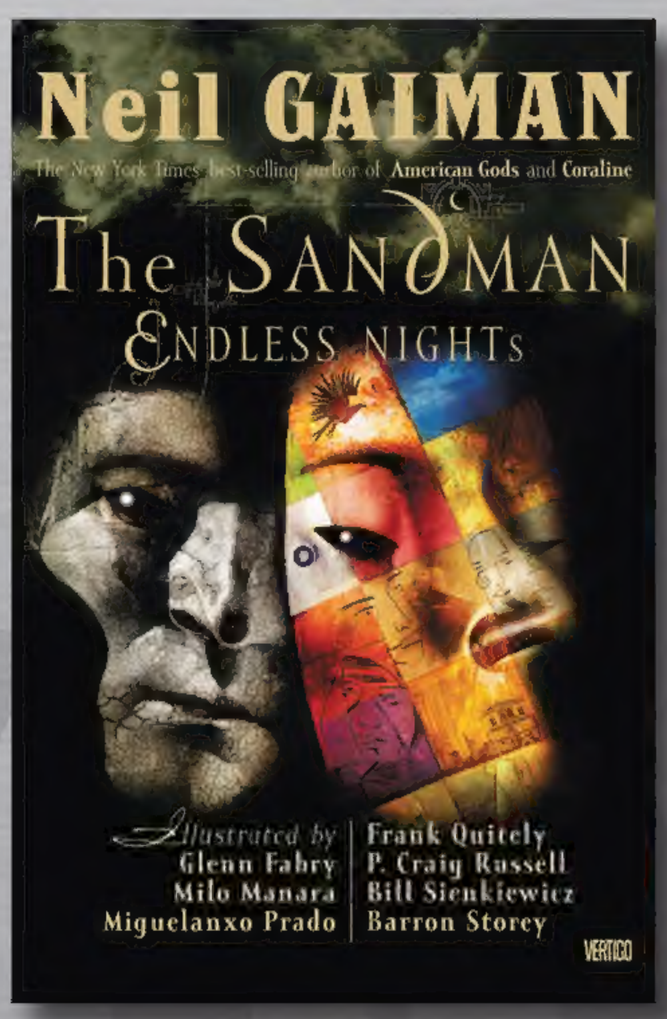
THE SANDMAN VOL. 4:
SEASON OF MISTS



THE SANDMAN VOL. 7:
BRIEF LIVES



THE SANDMAN:
ENDLESS NIGHTS



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